

THE TRINDADE ISLAND CASE Multiple Witnesses or Wishful Thinking?

John Rimmer

1957 was 'International Geophysical Year', a United Nations sponsored event which united scientists across the globe in a range of experiments and research designed to find out more about the structure of the Earth. (In fact, the 'Year' ran to eighteen months, well into 1958.) As part of the Brazilian government's contribution, in October of that year it set up a research station on the small, rocky islet of Trindade, in the South Atlantic Ocean, 600 miles off the coast of Brazil.



Although the main UFO event, which produced the photographs that have become the object of so much controversy, did not take place until after the arrival of the Brazilian naval training ship *Almirante Saldanha* in January 1958, a number of very interesting reports were made on the island before the ship's arrival. These included UFOs apparently interfering with radio transmissions from a balloon and an object tracked through binoculars and a sextant, and a photographic case which has important implications for subsequent events, which I shall return to later.

Present on the ship, but not part of the Brazilian navy crew, was a professional photographer, Almiro Barauna, and several colleagues from an underwater photography club. On 16 January 1958, at around mid-day as the ship was preparing to depart for Brazil an object was allegedly sighted by people on deck, and Barauna took some photographs of it. The object was described as "Saturn-shaped" – an ovoid disc with a distinct band around it at its widest point, which was likened to the rings of Saturn. Barauna took five photographs of the object as it moved around and behind the peak of the mountain on the small island.

Shortly afterwards, Barauna's photographs were developed in a makeshift darkroom on board the *Almirante Saldanha*, but because no photographic paper was available, only the negatives were

available for examination at the time. After examination by Captain Bacellar, the Commander of the naval post on Trindade who had now taken command of the ship for its return journey, Barauna was allowed to keep the negatives and *Almirante Saldanha* returned to Brazil, where Barauna disembarked, still with the negatives, at the port of Vitoria, and returned to his home by bus. The ship lay up in Vitoria for two days before sailing onward to Rio de Janeiro.

After returning home, Barauna produced prints from the negatives, and was then visited by Commander Bacellar, who took the enlargements away for examination, returning them a couple of days later. Barauna was interviewed by naval officials, and the negatives were examined by a photographic laboratory, which concluded that they were not the result of a double exposure.

The story of the UFO and the photographs had by now made the front pages of the Brazilian newspapers, and had attracted the attention of politicians, including the Brazilian President Juscelino Kubitschek. On 24 February, the Naval Ministry issued a statement denying claims that it was impeding the publication of the photographs and statements by the ships crew about the UFO incident: "This Ministry has no motive to impede the release of photographs ... taken by Mr Almiro Barauna ... in the presence of a large number of the crew of the *Almirante Saldanha* from whose deck the photographs were taken". The statement concludes: "This Ministry will not be able to make any announcements concerning the object seen, because the photographs do not constitute sufficient proof for such purpose".

This is a very significant statement, as it is a clear declaration that not only were photographs taken of a UFO, but that this object was seen by a large number of people. It is this which has given the Trindade case a special position in UFO history.

However, this statement is not borne out by closer examination of evidence subsequently released by the Ministry

In his substantial *UFO Encyclopedia* Jerome Clark concludes his summary of the case with the claim: "Given the number of witnesses, the results of photo analyses both military and civilian and the need for debunkers to 'reinvent' the incident to explain it, it seems most unlikely that the Trindade photographs were hoaxed". In captions to photographs in that encyclopedia Clark states that "48 witnesses saw the object", while the figure of 150 witnesses is given in Coral and Jim Lorenzen's account in *Fate* magazine. It is not clear what the source is for either of these figures.

Clearly, if the events are as described above, this is one of the most important UFO cases ever, being that rarest of things, a multi-witness, photographic case. Naturally, this account of events has been challenged, particularly by the 'usual suspects', UFO sceptics Donald Menzel and Phil Klass. Menzel claimed that the photographs had been produced by double exposure. In a letter to UFO investigator Richard Hall in 1963 a Project Blue Book official pointed out that Barauna had previously produced a hoax UFO photograph for a Brazilian magazine article.

However, the question of whether or not the photographs were hoaxed would be irrelevant if it could be conclusively proven that the UFO was witnessed, at the time, by anything between 48 and 150 members of the crew of the *Almirante Saldanha*. As most of these potential witnesses were naval personnel they would obviously be readily available for interview by the appropriate authorities, and as the Naval Ministry had confirmed that they had no interest in impeding the story, many may have been available to speak to the press. This is where things start to get more ambiguous.

In the first edition of *Magonia [Monthly] Supplement*, editor John Harney refers to this case when considering the evidence for the ETH. Quoting Jerome Clark's *Encyclopedia* remarks (above) he asks:

Well what are the agreed facts on this case? I was astonished to discover, on re-examining the literature on this incident that some of the most basic and presumably easily ascertainable facts are very much in dispute. For example, how many witnesses were there?

The answer, he claims, depends on whether you are a believer or a sceptic, as according to Coral Lorenzen, "Rio de Janeiro's *Ultimo Hora* on February 21 reported that at least a hundred

individuals had witnessed the sighting of the object".

Harney then quotes the US Naval Attaché in Rio (who was quoted in the letter to Richard Hall) who says that the Captain of the *Almirante Saldanha* only named his secretary as having seen it, but when interviewed the secretary was noncommittal on the matter.

This debate was re-opened on the Internet's UFO UpDates mailing list. In commenting on an unrelated topic, I quoted John Harney's article as giving an example of the way that even apparently well-witnessed UFO sightings became more doubtful when they were looked at in greater detail. This sparked a response from several American ufologists as to what evidence I had that the Trindade case was not as well witnessed as claimed. As I had merely been quoting John Harney's article, I decided that I should have to do some more research of my own. Fortunately, the case is well documented on Internet resources, most notably the CUFOS and NICAP websites. (In the rest of this article, the italicised quotations are all from documents available on the CUFOS website.)

One of the first things I discovered was that the Brazilian Navy seemed to be remarkably careless about these photographs, which, if taken at face value, would be almost certain evidence that a large physical object was flying around a Brazilian scientific station and a naval ship which was engaged on a scientific mission! Although I had originally been concerned only about the veracity of the figure of 48 (or 150) witnesses, the more I learned about this case the stranger the story of the photographs themselves turned out to be!

For a start, it seems remarkable that the *Almirante Saldanha* had no facilities for developing and printing films, even though there were according to some reports, at least four photographers on board. Although there seemed to be developing equipment and chemicals available, Barauna had to develop his film in a makeshift darkroom in one of the ship's lavatories! Remember also, that at this time the ship was moored off Trindade Island, where there was an IGY scientific station. Was this also devoid of photographic equipment? Apparently not.

As I mentioned above, even before the arrival of the *Almirante Saldanha* there had been a number of odd UFO-like incidents over the scientific station on the island, whose main function was a launching and tracking post for high-atmosphere research balloons. Olavo Fontes, in his extensive report on the case outlined seven separate incidents, including ones in which a UFO possibly interfered with radio transmissions from a balloon, and another

object was observed through binoculars and a sextant.

The object sighted in the final, island-based case, "appeared to be made of polished aluminium (or similar metal), and was shaped like a flattened spheroid with a large ring circling its equator. The spheroid body did not rotate, but the ring appeared to be spinning at fantastic speed." This makes it very similar to the object depicted in the Barauna photographs.

Fontes then says that "the investigation also revealed another important thing (also denied by Com. Bacellar): that the UAO had been photographed by one of the witnesses, a Navy sergeant. The man was taking pictures of the island with a box camera when he spotted the UAO moving across the sky. He shot one picture before it disappeared".

The reaction of the naval authorities to this incident is quite different to the relaxed response to Barauna: "The negative was immediately requested by Commander Bacellar and the film developed the same day. The picture was good enough to show that the object photographed was the same as described by the witnesses. Its spherical outline as well as the large thick ring around it could be clearly seen in the enlargements made from the negative."

So, the scientific base on the island had the facilities to quickly develop films and produce good quality prints, yet Barauna developed his film in a makeshift darkroom on board ship and was unable to make prints due to a supposed lack of photographic paper. What is going on here?

Even after the film was developed and examined by Commander Bacellar on board ship, it was returned to Barauna, who then had complete possession of it for at least six days until Bacellar turned up at Barauna's home and asked to be allowed to take the film and prints away for examination.

The question of the lack of control of the exposed film before it received adequate analysis is addressed as a 'negative point' by Corvette-Captain Jose Geraldo Brandao in the Naval Intelligence Section's report on the incident:

I-No prints of the film were made at the moment it was developed;

II-The ship's Commander didn't take possession of the negatives, after they were developed, in order to get the prints made later in the presence of witnesses;

III-The making of prints and enlargements was done by the photographer in his own photolab.

However, he also listed the 'positive points' that led him to accept the photographic evidence:

I-The report of the CC Bacellar, who saw in the film immediately after it was developed, still wet, the images he identified in the prints as the object photographed, and also that the pictures preceding the sequence connected with the object's passage corresponded with scenes taken aboard a few minutes before the incident;

II-The statements of the persons who sighted the object: they saw the copies of the photographs and declared they had seen exactly what appears on the photographs.

These positive points might be conclusive if we could verify that the UFO was also observed by 48 (or 150) other people who could confirm that its appearance and manoeuvres corresponded with the photographs. Surely, with all those witnesses there must be plenty of first-hand reports. In a response to my original comments on this case Jerome Clark pointed out that the official Brazilian Naval report into the case referred to "many" witnesses. This report, surely, would confirm the exact number of people who reported seeing the UFO at the time Barauna took his photographs? Well, the report does indeed say that "many" other people were present, but it presents no evidence to corroborate the claim that Trindade was one of the best witnessed reports in UFO history.

The official Brazilian report can be found on the CUFOS website. It is headed:

*INTERNAL COMMUNICATION-
CONFIDENTIAL No. 0043*

From: The Subchief of Intelligence.

To: The Vice-chief of the Navy High Command

Subject: Phenomena observed over the Trindade Island

Reference: Report No. 0005, of 1/6/1958, from the Chief of the Navy High Command to the Commander of the Trindade Island Oceanographic Post.

So this is a fairly high-level document. But its value as proof of an extraordinary event over Trindade is subverted by its opening paragraphs:

a) That there are a number of witnesses who state they have sighted unidentified aerial objects (UAOs) over the Trindade Island;

b) That most reports presented are insufficient, mostly due to the lack of technical skill of many observers and to the brief duration of the phenomena observed, so that no conclusion can be reached concerning positive data about the UAOs;

c) That the most important and valuable evidence presented, the photographic, somehow loses its convincing quality due to the impossibility to

[dis]prove a previous photomontage. [Note: this sentence only makes sense if the word is intended to be 'disprove'. I assume this to be a glitch in transcription – the inability to 'prove' a previous montage would actually add to its convincing quality.]

Further on, the report describes the circumstances under which the photographs were taken:

Obtained, from the deck of the NE "Almirante Saldanha", when anchored close to the Trindade Island, four photographs of a UAO, taken by a professional photographer in the presence of other witnesses who state they have sighted the object photographed.

Well, what we now expect are the names of these other witnesses, maybe not all 48 (or 150) of them, but at least eyewitness reports from the numerous naval officers, ratings and civilian personnel who we assume witnessed the events. Far from it. Although there are a number of references to "members of the ship's crew" having seen the object (at one point they are described as having an extremely strong emotional reaction to it) the only direct eyewitness reports, apart from Barauna's come from two people.

Firstly, the longest statement comes from Amilar Vieira Filho, president of the Icarus Club for Submarine [Underwater? – an over-literal translation from the Portuguese?] Hunting. In an interview to a reporter from *O Globo* he reports:

First, I want to make it very clear that I don't know if what I saw was really the so-called 'flying saucer'. What I saw, in fact, was an object of gray color and oval in shape when first sighted, which passed over the island and then – emitting a fluorescent light it didn't possess before – went away toward the horizon and was gone, vanishing just on the horizon line. Everything happened in just a few seconds, in no more than 20 seconds, and for this reason I cannot give you more details about the curious craft. It looked like an object with polished surface and uniform color. I am sure it was not a balloon, an airplane, or a seagull.

Further questioned, he adds:

As I said before, the thing was too rapid. It was almost impossible for the human vision to fix any detail of the object. Mr. Barauna, however, was operating with a camera of modern type which was able to register those details. Generally speaking, the shape of the object sighted was the same seen on the negatives developed aboard the NE "Almirante Saldanha".

This latter comment is rather odd, giving the

impression that the whole event was over in a second or so, yet Barauna had time to take five photographs using his Rolleiflex camera, and after taking the last photograph the object remained in view for a further ten seconds before "gradually diminishing in size and finally disappearing into the horizon" Rather different from "the thing was too rapid, almost impossible for the human vision to fix any detail". The business about Barauna's 'camera of modern type' is quite irrelevant.

The other directly quoted witness, Captain (Retd.) Jose Teobaldo Viegas, also was a member of Barauna's underwater exploration club. He mentions other witnesses on deck, but we have no statements from them, and although there was apparently another photographer on deck at the time he failed to get any photographs at all. Viegas states:

I was on the deck. My friend Amilar Vieira Filho suddenly called my attention to what he thought to be a 'big seagull.' I looked toward it and was unable to control my excitement, shouting: 'Flying saucer!' Mr. Barauna was 20 yards away with his Rolleiflex, watching the manoeuvres [loading equipment onto the ship before departure]. He heard my shouts and came running – in time to take four pictures of the object. Other people were also alerted by my alarm: a sergeant, sailors, the ship's dentist (Lieutenant Captain Homero Ribeiro), and other persons. They all sighted the object. The photographer Farias de Azevedo, who was more distant, didn't come in time to get photos.

(One question occurs to me here; if the object was circling the mountain peak more than a thousand metres away, why would it have been necessary for Azevedo to 'come in time' to get photos, if he was already on deck? Couldn't he have taken the photo from where he was standing?)

Viegas was also the person who accompanied Barauna into the makeshift darkroom to develop the negatives whilst Captain Bacellar remained outside. (An odd aspect of this is that Barauna, apparently because of the hot conditions in the darkroom, stripped to his underpants to develop the film. Captain Bacellar and the investigator, Olavo Fontes, saw this as additional evidence that he could not have faked the photographs by smuggling some equipment or film into the darkroom. Curiously, we have no record as to whether or not Viegas also stripped.)

The third named witness, Antonio Homero Ribeiro the ship's dentist, is never quoted directly in any of the reports I have been able to find, and is only mentioned by Barauna as one of the people, along with Viegas and Filho, who drew the UFO to

his attention. So Barauna names three other people as witnesses of the event, but only two, Filho and Viegas, gives any form of direct statement, and this to a newspaper rather than the Government investigator. Viego mentions Ribeiro and Azevedo, but we hear no more of them.

Although in the Internet discussion much was made, by Jerome Clark and others, about the “thorough” investigation by the Naval authorities, in fact the report is based solely on second-hand reports, largely from Commander Bacellar, who, on his own account was below decks at the time, and was only alerted by the shouts of – presumably – Barauna and his associates. The “thorough” report does not interview any of the other alleged witnesses.

Federal Deputy Sergio Magalhaes who originally raised the matter at government level, requesting an investigation into the facts connected with the incident at Trindade, protested to the Navy Ministry at their failure to secure sworn statements from witnesses:

For the first time in flying saucer history, the phenomenon was attended by large numbers of persons belonging to a military force, which gives these photographs an official stamp. Threats to national security require greater official attention and action.

So it's not only sceptical ufologists who were dissatisfied with the quality of the Brazilian Government's investigation.

Now, when I pointed all this out in the UFO UpDates discussion, I felt that all that was needed was for the proponents of the case's importance to come up with the names of a few more direct eyewitness testimonies, either from contemporary newspapers, or from Government sources. I wasn't expecting 48 (or 150), but even three or four more direct statements would have made my argument very shaky indeed. Perhaps even just one statement from someone who was *not* a member of Barauna's underwater diving team!

(One small point: Jerome Clark took me to task for describing the other witnesses as ‘friends’ of Barauna, just because they were members of the same diving club. Captain Viegas describes Filho as a ‘friend’ in his statement (above), and Olavo Fontes also describes Barauna, Filho and Viegas and ‘friends’.)

It seemed now that *I* was expected to come up with a statement from someone who was present at the time who did *not* see the UFO! Surely, Jerome Clark thundered, with all the hullabaloo going on in the press and elsewhere, non-witnesses would be lining up to sell their non-story to the newspapers. In

one exchange Clark says: “John has yet to produce the name of a single individual who, while in a position to see the UFO Barauna photographed, stated that he saw nothing. I have named witnesses. John has named none, only continued to indulge in innuendo.”

The only comment I can make here is that if there were, as I suggest, no other witnesses to this event, how could anyone be “in a position to see the UFO [that] Barauna photographed”, and how could anyone therefore challenge Barauna's version of events?

Even if you were on deck when Barauna and company were running around shouting hysterically – yes, that *is* what happened. It is claimed that ship's dentist Ribeiro was so flustered he allegedly fell over a cable in his panic! – how would you realise what you were supposed to see, or that it was significant that you didn't see anything? After all, as Amilar Vieira Filho said: “the thing was too rapid. It was almost impossible for the human vision to fix any detail of the object”. Over in a flash, what significance would it be if you hadn't seen anything? Certainly nothing worth going to the newspapers about, or risking the attention of more military investigators – perhaps the very ones whose report you were, by implication, criticising.

Imagine if you were a member of a military unit, and military Intelligence officers were coming around asking about an incident which, remember, was reported only by civilian personnel, would you voluntarily stick your head over the parapet to present a statement that nothing happened? Especially if you knew that your country's authoritarian President had taken a personal interest in the case? How would you actually know that *you* were meant to be one of the 48 (or 150) witnesses?

Maybe, buried deep in the vaults of the Brazilian National Archives there exists a report which lists the 48 (or 150) witnesses of this case. Maybe one day Brazilian versions of Dr. David Clarke and Andy Roberts will uncover it and I will have to eat my words. But until then, I feel the Trindade Island case rests on far shakier foundations than its chroniclers would have you believe. And, moreover, that the responsibility is on saucer proponents to demonstrate that independent witnesses *did* see the object, rather than I should start searching for improbable statements from people who may not have been there that they *didn't* see it!

Postscript

After this debate continued on the UpDates list for several weeks, gradually getting more and more

circular in its arguments, there came an intervention from a researcher in Brazil, offering what he claimed was new evidence. In fact this turned out to be some cuttings sent to Richard Hall in the 1960s. I was unimpressed, and replied:

I have said this ad nauseam, and I will not repeat it until some new material is available (and Richard Hall's cuttings are certainly not new material. They are second, third, or fourth hand accounts); we have no direct evidence from anyone except two people who are known to be associates of the photographer prior to the incident. We are nowhere near the "48 witnesses" claimed in Jerry's encyclopedias.

Then, in a dramatic intervention Jerome Clark replied, "Wrong, old boy. There is some very important new evidence. I'm sorry to say that the news, for you, is not good."

Before completing this piece, I e-mailed back to Clark to see if this new material was yet available for publication: "Are you able to give me any further details of this important new evidence?"

Jerry replied: "Yeah, it's still out there and will be announced, I'm sure, in the near future. As I understand it, it pretty much eliminates whatever small possibility there was, if any, that the photos were hoaxed. You'll know about it when the report is released." It will be fascinating, after fifty years, to learn what this evidence might be. My hope would be that it was additional contemporary eye-witness reports, with direct statements from named individuals who were present, on the deck of the *Almirante Saldanha*. I would be disappointed if it were merely a re-hash of the photographic analyses that were made at the time.

Sources

http://www.cufos.org/trindade_fs1.html

<http://www.virtuallystrange.net/cgi-bin/search-email.cgi?index=%2Fufo%2Fupdates%2F&key=jrimmer>

<http://www.magonia.demon.co.uk/arc/00/ms01.html>

EDITORIAL

In this issue, John Rimmer takes a look at one of the great "classics" of ufology, the Trindade Island case. It is an excellent example of the will-to-believe in action among ufologists, especially the type which Jim Moseley refers to as "Serious Ufologists".

These people took it for granted that the story and the photographs were genuine because there were so many witnesses that it was inconceivable that it could be explained as a hoax or a misperception of some mundane object or phenomenon. They did not ask who these witnesses were and they did not ask to see the statements they presumably made to official and amateur investigators. Not only did they not ask but when John Rimmer raised the question on the UFO UpDates mailing list, he found that such questions were not exactly welcome. Doubt was being cast on a ufological article of faith.

However, those who were distressed by this attempt to debunk this great classic case were no doubt relieved when Jerome Clark announced that important new evidence would soon become available which would show that it could not possibly have been a hoax.

We are eagerly awaiting this event and we earnestly hope that we do not have to publish too many gentle reminders in this newsletter before this promise is fulfilled.



FIRST SUNDAY OF EACH
MONTH, 1915-2230, AT
THE RAILWAY, OPPOSITE
PUTNEY STATION

HOKEY SMOKE!

Martin S. Kottmeyer

KEYHOE opens his first book on flying saucers with a case chosen to grab your attention. The Tucson *Daily Citizen* has run a double banner headline proclaiming that B-29s had failed to catch flying saucers that were seen over Tucson the day before. The journalist wonders if it was a secret experimental plane or a scout craft from Mars.

"Cannonballing through the sky, some 30,000 feet aloft, was a fiery object shooting westward so fast it was impossible to gain any clear impression of its shape or size...At what must have been top speed the object spewed out light colored smoke, but almost directly over Tucson it appeared to hover a few seconds. The smoke puffed out an angry black and then became lighter as the strange missile appeared to gain speed."

A nearby Air Force base control tower contacted a B-29 in the vicinity and asked the pilot First Lt. Roy L. Jones to investigate. However, the unknown aircraft pulled away and was last seen headed to California. The head of the University of Arizona Department of Astronomy, Edwin F. Carpenter, said it was not a meteor or other natural phenomenon.

The switchboards of the local police departments jammed with enquiries. One resident, Tom Bailey, thought it must have been a plane on fire. But a check found none missing. "He said the smoke apparently came out in a thin almost invisible stream, gaining substance within a few seconds."

The following day the USAF spent hours etching vapour trails in the sky over Tucson. Local residents observed that these bore no resemblance to what they observed the day before and thus did not emanate from any conventional plane. "The Wednesday night spectacle was entirely dissimilar. Then, heavy smoke boiled and swirled in a broad dark ribbon fanning out at least a mile in width and stretching across the sky in a straight line." White Sands Proving Grounds issued a denial that they had been engaged in any missile testing on the day of incident. Experts could not explain it. Requests for details from the Air Force were stonewalled to the frustration of radio journalists like Frank Edwards. (Later, he was an author of saucer books.)

Keyhoe's interest in the 1 February 1950 Davis Monthan AFB case is easy enough to understand. The fact that the Air Force asked a

nearby plane to investigate suggests strongly that they had no knowledge of what had been seen. It was not one of ours. A reader new to the case a half century later will however be puzzled at why anyone would take this seriously as evidence for the ETH. A Martian scout craft emitting heavy angry black smoke? That doesn't sound very much like advanced technology.

Another red flag is that this happens over a major American city and is seen by enough people to jam switchboards. As Hynek has observed, cases with hundreds of witnesses invariably get solved as something other than extraterrestrial spaceships. (J. Allen Hynek, 'UFOs as a Space-Time Singularity', 1978 MUFON Symposium Proceedings, 114-120.) But was this one ever solved? UFO historian Loren Gross, the only person in recent years to have written on the case, seems to have not found any explanation for it in his usually extensive research. (*UFOs: A History: 1950: January-March*, 16-17.) It is not listed as an unknown in the Project Blue Book files (Brad Steiger, *Project Blue Book*, Ballantine, 1976, 349; Kevin Randle, *Project Blue Book Exposed*, Marlowe, 1997, 215.) The index role of the Project Blue Book files, however, does not list the case at all – solved or unsolved.

Keyhoe makes passing reference – two sentences – to the case in his second book (*Flying Saucers from Outer Space*, Henry Holt, 1953, 43-44.) But none of his later books mention it. Especially curious, you won't see it in his brief chronology of significant UFO events in *Flying Saucers: Top Secret* (Putnam, 1960, 41.) It turns up as a brief item in NICAP's *The UFO Evidence* (1964), misdated 2-2-50.

Gerald Heard was impressed by the case. He indicated the "wonderful show" had been "the biggest so far" – at that date of early 1950. In his version, the object swooped over the city, paused, and then came a burst of black smoke and "off it went at its super-dashing speed." The Tucson paper carefully collected the reports, but the Associated Press did not carry it. Heard remarked the smoke suggested the craft "did puff and pant in the true old-fashioned combustion engine way". (*Is Another World Watching?*, Bantam, 1950/3, 60-61, 93-94.) He felt that the cases with no smoke or visible exhaust are "far more mysterious" and they are the

more numerous. But he mentions there are analogous incidents where tubes show “a good, fine, kicking and splashing flame.”

Commander Alvin Moore offered the longest comment on the case in a book written in 1954, but published in 1979. He suggested it resulted from “crude-oil-like skychemicals” or possibly formaldehyde resulting from the burning of methane and combination with stratospheric ozone. “Methane could be present on sky-islands.” Moore was a student of Fort. (*Mystery of the Skymen*, Saucerian Press, 1979, 101-102.) In case you did not catch the irony here, let’s note that methane is considered the prime component in swamp gas. (“Swamp Gas” entry, Ron Story, ed., *Encyclopedia of UFOs*, Dolphin, 1980, 355.) Preceding and inverting Hynek, he was suggesting not that swamp gas causes flying saucers, but saucers burn swamp gas!

Interest in the case dropped away in later decades. It generated no mention in APRO’s *Flying Saucers: The Startling Evidence of the Invasion from Outer Space* (Signet, 1966), Hynek’s books, Paris Flammonde’s histories, David Jacobs’s history *The UFO Controversy in America* (1975), nor in the works of critics like Ruppelt or Menzel. Presently, we can add two more bits to the assessment. From David Hatcher Childress’s clipping file, we can add some information from Los Angeles papers that Keyhoe and Heard must have missed. The B-29 pilot discounted the possibility it was a flying saucer. He believed it was a new jet plane. On 3 February, officers from Davis-Monthan AFB stated the traces in the sky were “vapour trails from a high-flying American airplane.” (David Hatcher Childress, Dewayne B. Johnson, & Kenn Thomas, *Flying Saucers Over Los Angeles: The UFO Craze of the 50’s*, Adventures Unlimited, 1998, 49.)

The clipping does not get into why the plane emitted that black smoke, however, so at least for me, it is technically unexplained in the feature that is strangest and most intriguing. I will concede that strangeness is a matter of context. Yes, there are other examples of UFOs trailing smoke in the literature and some are not that far back in time either. From September 20, 1991 there is a case out of Etowah, Tennessee where a car filled with passengers saw an oval, transparent craft scripting an L with its smoke trail. In it could be seen several figures moving their arms and hands very rapidly. Two of the car’s occupants became ill shortly

afterwards and died within a year and a half. (Albert Rosales Humanoid catalogue, 1991, entry No. 80; citing John C Thompson of ISUR) Whether ufologists should regard this as a point in favour of the validity of the 1950 Davis-Monthan case due to the doctrine of repetition equals reality, I’m inclined to doubt.

Joining with Heard, I feel alien spacecraft would not smoke. Eco-minded aliens surely would not mess up the atmosphere with pollutants, would they? Still, we can’t say it is impossible. This borders on being a matter of aesthetics. One might like to argue that a superior technology would be too efficient or reliable to sporadically emit smoke from their vehicles. But this is hardly in the realm of hard physical certainties. The only law possibly being broken is Clarke’s Law about sufficiently advanced technology being indistinguishable from magic. Black smoke is not a very magical image, at least not to science-minded moderns.

It’s probably fruitless to speculate why this case dropped out of the literature to be either lost or forgotten. There are too many possibilities. I strongly doubt anybody will be eager to pick it up and advance it as a mega-classic because of the large population of witnesses who reportedly saw it. Experience suggests it would be a sucker bet with a mundane solution probably certain to turn up with additional investigation. Technically speaking, though, it seems to be unexplained in a full sense. What nags on my mind, though, is if this is something we should really care about?

Ufologists seem annoyed when unbelievers try to explain cases. It is very important when science does not solve this or that mystery they tell us. But what of a case like this? A major city full of witnesses saw something at the start of the Fifties that emitted an angry black cloud of smoke. A half-century later, is this a mystery of any real consequence? If science continues to ignore it, what really happens in the larger stream of history? There may or may not have been fire where this smoke was, but the time to worry about it passed long ago.

Ultimately, the case is not important to me as an unbeliever either. I only pulled together the material here because I loved the idea that Keyhoe started his first pro-ETH book with a case that another writer attributed to alien utilisation of swamp gas. To quote that inimitable IFO, Rocket J. Squirrel, Hokey Smoke!